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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 6170
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 4486
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 2170
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO 4449
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3550
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 8604
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 6049
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO 0711
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2867
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000668

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: CHALLENGE ISSUED AND WITHDRAWN TO
WICKREMESINGHE'S UNP LEADERSHIP

REF: A. COLOMBO 653

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 571

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT O. BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: Ranil Wickremesinghe, leader of the main opposition United National Party (UNP) has faced the third challenge to his leadership since 2000. In June, a group of senior UNP MPs threatened to boycott the upcoming Provincial Council (PC) election campaigns (Ref A) if Wickremesinghe did not step down, paving the way for UNP Chairman and current MP Rukman Senanayake to lead the party. Ultimately Wickremesinghe's centralized control over the party in addition to growing concerns about the power struggle undermining UNP's chances in the elections forced the rebel MPs to withdraw their challenge. However, the widespread perception that Wickremesinghe is a weak general election candidate will keep the issue of who will head the UNP ticket during the next Parliamentary and Presidential elections a topic of some interest in Colombo's political circles. End summary.

CHALLENGE ISSUED AND WITHDRAWN

[1](#)2. (U) On June 25, four UNP MPs led by Lakshman Seneviratne and Johnston Fernando, claiming to have the support of over thirty of the UNP's forty-two members in Parliament formally issued a challenge to Ranil Wickremesinghe's leadership. They suggested that Wickremesinghe step down as UNP head and instead lead an alliance of opposition parties with former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress, and UPFA rebel MP Mangala Samaraweera. This proposal would have provided Wickremesinghe with a path to an honorable exit, as well as give Kumaratunga a more influential position until President Rajapakse becomes unpopular enough for her to try and return as leader of the SLFP. The rebels called for UNP Party Chairman and current MP Rukman Senanayake to lead the UNP in Wickremesinghe's place, sought more powerful positions for S.B. Disanayake and MP Sajith Premadasa, and asked for amendments to the party constitution to make it more democratic.

13. (U) On July 1, Seneviratne informed the UNP Working Committee before whom the rebels had made their proposal, that they would withdraw their challenge to the party hierarchy in order to unite their efforts to succeed in the PC elections on August 23. At the same meeting, the Working Committee empowered Wickremesinghe to choose the chief ministerial and other candidates for the PC elections.

14. (U) This marked the third attempt to oust Wickremesinghe who has led the UNP since 1994. Both prior attempts in 2000 and 2005 were led by former Deputy Leader Karu Jayasuriya. The last resulted in the cross-over of 17 UNP MPs to President Rajapakse's UPFA coalition. The repeated failures of the rebels to topple Wickremesinghe are a demonstration of the extreme difficulty in ousting the leader within UNP party rules that leave little room for intra-party democracy.

UNP INFIGHTING ONLY HELPS THE PRESIDENT

15. (U) President Rajapakse's UPFA coalition has encouraged the rift within the UNP, hoping to see the party self-implode before the PC elections and possibly gain some MPs from additional cross-overs. The UNP's loss of more than 15 elections under Wickremesinghe's leadership has rankled many party members who feel that they have little influence in daily party decisions. Wickremesinghe also struggles against a perception by some, if not most, in the Sinhalese community that the UNP, under his leadership, would surrender back the recent gains made against the LTTE if they were to return to

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power and enter into fresh negotiations with the Tigers.

THE KEY PLAYERS

16. (C) While most political observers agree that Wickremesinghe is a weak general election candidate there is no obvious successor waiting in the wings that disaffected UNP members can rally around. Rukman Senanayake, S.B. Dissanayake and Sajith Premadasa are often mentioned when reports of a new party head or a reshuffled party leadership surface.

17. (C) MP Rukman Senanayake is the grand-nephew of D.S. Senanayake, founder of the party and Sri Lanka's first Prime Minister, as well as the nephew of second Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake. Senanayake has remained a non-controversial MP since his election to Parliament in 1973. He would be better able to lead the UNP to an alliance with the JVP, unlike Wickremesinghe whose personal style and political views are sharply at odds with the nationalistic party.

18. (C) S.B. Dissanayake, currently the UNP's National Organizer, is an ex-JVP,er and sacked ex-Minister of Chandrika Kumaratunga's government who joined the UNP after he was jailed for contempt of court. Currently, Dissanayake is working to regain his civic rights, a precondition to becoming an MP or running in elections. He told Poloff in a July 9 meeting that he expected his case to be resolved within three to four months. Dissanayake is charismatic but rumored to be corrupt and does not pose much of a threat to Wickremesinghe's leadership. However, Kumaratunga and then Wickremesinghe have recognized his knowledge of the JVP operations and his fearlessness during a campaign.

19. (C) MP Sajith Premadasa, son of former President Ranasinghe Premadasa, is in his late thirties and is seeking to be recognized as a senior member of the party. Of the three, Sajith is the leader most often projected as a future Prime Minister. He has carefully attempted to project his late father's "common touch" and sought to cultivate a political base in the south, which has been complicated by the President's own southern roots and popularity there. He

has been careful to avoid the Colombo political mud pit, opting instead to focus on helping the poor in his district, with regular trips abroad to bolster his foreign policy experience.

PROVINCIAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS

¶10. (U) The UNP,s internal strife has been boiling under the pressure of the upcoming Provincial Council elections to be conducted in the North Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces on August 23. Wickremesinghe has sought to quell critics by appointing Senanayake, Dissanayake, and Premadasa to key organizing positions for the PC campaigns. However, these appointments also ensure that in the event of a defeat Wickremesinghe will be able shift some, perhaps most, of the blame to them, the main threats to his power.

COMMENT: MOST LIKELY NOT THE LAST CHALLENGE TO WICKREMESINGHE'S LEADERSHIP

¶11. (C) COMMENT: A win in the upcoming PC elections would reverse Wickremesinghe's losing streak and help buck up party morale. However, both the Opposition and the ruling UPFA expect that a win by the government will produce a new round of limited PC elections with Uva, the Central, Southern and Northwestern provinces being the most commonly discussed possibilities. Though the party has united in anticipation

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of the elections, a defeat on August 23rd could lead to the re-emergence of challenges to Wickremesinghe,s leadership. If Ranil again resists, the rebels could be tempted to lure a sufficiently large number of MPs broke away from the UNP to break Ranil's hold on the party, paving the way for someone, perhaps Senanayake to then take the reins. An overthrow will continue to remain difficult, although Wickremesinghe's departure may become more likely once national elections draw near.
BLAKE